



To Democratic Congressional Challengers,  
**Re: CA-50 Post-Special Election (Busby-Bilbray) Polling Memo**

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*Data for this polling memo was commissioned by the Courage Campaign, a non-partisan, progressive 527 based in Los Angeles, and MyDD.com, a progressive political blog. Wright Consulting Services conducted all polling. More information is available at [www.couragecampaigns.org](http://www.couragecampaigns.org).*

**Fall Election Environment Overview:**

This fall, you will face a grotesque political environment, one that requires strategic knowledge, great courage and fortitude to successfully navigate. Facing low approval ratings, Republicans will introduce you to the voters as a flip-flopping, gay-loving, liberal terrorist coddler who wants to cut and run from Iraq, all at the behest of self-absorbed Hollywood moguls and liberal elites.

The establishment Democrats have proven ineffective at combating this positioning, introducing empty slogans like ‘Together we can do better’ that no one repeats or remembers, and policy proposals that few voters believe Democrats are capable of enacting. Most of the polling and advice you’ll get from DC insiders and journalists will largely rehash bad information, false choices and irrelevant answers to poorly framed questions. If you take their advice, you will not make significant headway in convincing voters you are best to represent them. And when you lose, it’ll be you who ran a bad campaign, not “them.” Just ask Francine Busby.

Perhaps worst of all, you will probably face some form of October surprise from the Republicans and your opponent: a game-changing event or message stream. And you will be blind-sided because establishment Democrats will be caught off-guard. Again. And you and your campaign will pay the price of their failure.

Realistically, when it comes to developing a winning position and messaging, you are on your own. Or rather, you are on your own, except that the voters – Democrats,

Republicans, and Independents alike - agree with the outrage that you feel towards the political system and agree that Republican leadership is the problem. Yet, voters will only vote for change if they know you can deliver on that change once elected.

So far, few believe that will happen, as our data in CA-50 show.

### **Why CA-50 matters to you and your campaign:**

Francine Busby and the DCCC spent more than \$5 million on a nationalized Congressional race in California's 50th District. As the Democratic contender in the only partisan federal race so far this year, she was the Petri dish for testing Beltway techniques and messages. She ran on the national party's first semester message of "the culture of corruption" against a former Congressman turned lobbyist in a district where her predecessor is in jail for taking millions of dollars in bribes from defense contractors. A conservative, heavily military district where Dianne Feinstein won in 2000 and where Barbara Boxer lost by less than one percentage point in 2004, she ran as a "bi-partisan Democrat who would go to Washington to clean house and accomplish a seven point policy plan." She dodged the Iraq war as if it were a bullet aimed directly at her. In short, she played by the national insider rules.

And Francine Busby lost. The national committees and insiders have moved on. Her campaign team has simply moved out, taking the blame for doing what they were told by the 'experienced' Beltway consultants.

Focus on this: *Francine Busby lost a race to Brian Bilbray, a Republican lobbyist and former member of Congress, someone about as "inside" as it gets.* Even though Busby ran on the culture of corruption line and Cunningham sits in jail with a mere 6% favorability in the CA-50, and, further, even though few voters believed that Bilbray had credibility on standing up to Bush on immigration, she lost. We know this because we polled extensively in the district this summer to find out why an extremely well funded national campaign utterly failed. Given that this was the only Congressional election so far this year between a Republican and a Democrat, we wanted to learn some lessons. This is the only data set on the only Federal partisan election that has happened in 2006 so far. It is very much worth understanding.

### **What happened in California's 50th?**

California 50<sup>th</sup> is a right-leaning district, though not overwhelmingly so (John Kerry got 44% of the vote in 2004). The seat was open because Duke Cunningham resigned and ultimately went to jail in the midst of a bribery scandal. Democrat Francine Busby's messaging was therefore focused on the then national message of "the culture of corruption." She ran a policy-heavy campaign, proposing what she asserted was the 'toughest' ethics legislation out there, while at the same time attacking Bilbray for his lobbying work. Republican Brian Bilbray focused his campaign on a hard-right message of cracking down on illegal immigrants.

Surprisingly, *neither message worked*. In an open-ended question, less than 4% of voters cited Republican corruption as a reason for voting for Busby. Similarly, Bilbray voters did not believe that Bilbray had the ability to divert from the Bush agenda and crack down on illegal immigrants. In fact, both candidates were largely undefined to the electorate, despite a highly agitated voter pool seeking change. While there was high Democratic turnout, Busby lost because *independent voters did not believe that she could deliver on her policy promises and did not believe she was substantially more ethical than Bilbray*. So, in large numbers, they either stayed home or voted for third party candidates.

*Busby's lack of definition as a candidate and lack of message credibility allowed Bilbray to solidify his voter base, even though that base evidenced a substantial amount of dissatisfaction with the Republican Party and President Bush.*

## Lessons for Candidates Around the Country

The obvious problem with Busby's messaging was that she dodged Iraq as though it were a bullet aimed at her head. According to all available polling information, Iraq is consistently the number one issue on voters' minds. The absence of Iraq as an issue in the campaign is one likely reason why turnout was so low in CA-50. This in contrast to record breaking turnout in the Connecticut primary, in which messaging strategy did focus on the war. To the extent Busby discussed the situation in Iraq, it was in the context of a vague withdrawal plan rather than as a challenge to Bush and Republican war strategy.

In our research, we asked respondents in California's 50<sup>th</sup> a series of questions about Iraq and the political impact of the war situation. The findings were stunning, and reveal a deep split in the Republican base vote.

- 63% of Republican voters believe that Bush has made some or a lot of mistakes in Iraq.
- 34% of Republican voters believe that Bush has definitely or probably not told the truth about the situation in Iraq.
- 34% of Republican voters believe that Bush should probably or definitely be held accountable for the situation in Iraq.
- 40% of Republican voters believe that the Democratic Party is more likely to hold Bush accountable for mistakes in Iraq

While the country is open to the idea of partial or total troop withdrawal, according to our data in CA-50 existing withdrawal messaging loses badly to Republican 'cut and run' counter-attack messaging. This suggests that voters are seeking a set of actors in Congress who will tell the truth about the war and *hold Bush accountable* for mistakes. This is in contrast to an immediate end to the conflict and /or yet another withdrawal plan that Congress cannot enact. Voters intuitively understand that Congress doesn't run the military, and that regardless of the outcome of the 2006 election, Bush will be in charge of the military until 2009. As such, *framing the election as a choice between rival Congressional military plans sacrifices the credibility of Democratic candidates who can only legitimately promise to hold hearings, restore congressional oversight of military matters, locate and identify blame, and serve as a check on a widely disliked and distrusted President.*

## Recommendations

Candidates should run aggressively on accountability and the war in Iraq. Here are six specific 'rules of thumb' we recommend you use for planning purposes.

1. **Iraq Must Be Central in your Campaign and You Must Blame Republicans for It:** Ignoring Iraq, downplaying its significance, or accepting Bush's framework by not blaming leaders is a sign to voters that you are weak, unlikely to bring change, and not addressing the main issue of the day. Regardless of how you approach the policy going forward in Iraq, the key trait that voters seek is a

*willingness to hold failed leaders accountable for the debacle.* Be willing to uncover the truth, place blame, and demand consequences.

2. **The debate on whether Bush is a competent, trustworthy President is over.** He is considered among Republicans, Democrats, and Independents a leader who makes mistakes and then won't tell the truth about those mistakes. This is not about competence. This is about massive *failure of leadership* with no end in sight..
3. **Republicans cannot run against Bush and Iraq.** Voters do not think that Republicans are willing to hold Bush or other administration figures accountable for those mistakes, so Republican Congressional dissent on the war is unlikely to help Republicans. But dissent will, in fact, work to Democratic candidates' advantage. *It shows strength and, most importantly, principle and personal values.*
4. **'Terrorism' scares only work in the absence of strong accountability messaging,** since Republicans are no longer trustworthy on issues of war and peace. Voters know Republicans will let mistakes slide and they want accountability in the face of that.
5. **Oversight beats withdrawal:** Journalists or other messengers who frame politics in terms of a need to have an alternative plan in contrast to Bush are insulting voters, and should be taken to task aggressively for framing false choices and misrepresenting the role of Congress. Congress primarily serves as military oversight, not military policy. Voters know that.
6. **Pick a fight, any fight:** Voters need to be convinced that Democrats can credibly challenge Bush. Whether the fight is over de-funding Cheney's personal staff, attacking John Bolton's confirmation, impeachment hearings, or stopping war profiteering with a new 'Truman Commission', Democratic candidates must demonstrate strength through aggressive confrontation where the term "accountability" is more than just an abstraction or corporate lingo. It must be made real through a fight you plan to pick.

When presented with squeals from journalists and Republicans over your fight, a resolute willingness to *not back off* in the face of criticism is key. Your willingness to hold Bush accountable must be made real. For example, demand that the president and the party in power come to account for having squandered lives, security and treasure while enriching CEOs of major corporations such as Halliburton.

Here's a real-world example of this dynamic from US history: Harry Truman became vice president because as a US Senator, he had the backbone to demand that major figures in the American economy either give back money stolen in the provision of shoddy materiel for World War II, or go to jail for treason.

In sum, whatever fights you pick, whether specific local issues or national ones, our poll shows that accountability regarding Bush, Congressional Republicans and your opponent is crucial to building the credibility you need in order to break through with a majority vote in November. Democrats, Independents and even many Republicans want this to occur. Do it.